



A hot wind from Africa
warming November hearts

Description

The concert *Being a Griot Today* ignites the Bourgie Hall with a fusion repertoire

By **Luc Archambault**

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The concert *Being a Griot Today*, in the context of the exhibition [Full Volume: Basquiat and Music](#), echoed visual artist Jean-Michel Basquiat's fascination with griots, musicians and storytellers from West Africa. Four Montreal griots – **Djely Tapa**, **Zal Sissokho**, **Aboulaye Koné** and **Fa Sissokho** – all descendants of prestigious families of the Mandingo Empire, came together for this concert at [Salle Bourgie](#) on November 24.

This concert was of a rare intensity. One would have thought it was an evening from *Nuits d'Afrique*, not the venerable Salle Bourgie. All dressed in gold and swaying to the wild rhythms of her acolytes, Djely Tapa succeeded in bewitching the audience. She even got them to stand up and join in the dance.

Being a Griot today

Griots were highly respected figures in their societies since they embodied respect and the ability to deal with disagreements that might exist between people living in the same society. Not only a palace figure, invited by the king as an advisor but also a mediator of disputes in societies, the griot was originally a scholar, holder of the word, using it to mend dissensions.



Who is a griot, and who is not? One wonders, with reason, especially with the excessive commercialization of the role of the griot in the musical sphere. The power of money has now overtaken this tradition, a custom that has been cherished for generations. As a leveller, money is becoming more and more of a destroyer of the cultural and traditional values of Africa.

Today, anyone can call himself a griot. To earn money, some are even taking on a role that is not theirs and even pretending to be a Kéita griot, who is supposed to belong to the royal class.

The history of a thousand-year-old oral tradition

To the sound of the kora, percussion or guitar, between words, songs and traditional Mandingo rhythms, the concert is rooted in the ancestral art of the griot of West Africa and retraces the history of a thousand-year-old oral tradition. As carriers of culture and messengers of the African tradition, the four musicians made us discover many tales from their homeland.

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All four come from the most prestigious griot families: Djely Tapa (Mali), Zai Sissokho (Senegal), Fa Sissokho (Senegal), Aboulaye Koné (Ivory Coast – Burkina Faso). Now living in Montreal, these griots came together for an evening at the Salle Bourgie.

Djely Tapa

Descendant of an illustrious lineage of Malian griots, the singer **Djely Tapa** enlivened the stage with a repertoire



fusing Sahelian, blues and electro atmospheres. Her album *Barokan* is a resounding tribute to women and Africanness. With her rich and powerful voice, incandescent delivery, and elegant gesture, Djely Tapa is a vocalist of high standing. In May 2019, she was named *Révélation Radio-Canada Musique du Monde* and *Barokan* received the award for *Best World Music Album* at the 2020 Juno Awards. She is also a recipient of the 2022 *Black History Month* award.

Zal Sissokho

Author-composer-performer, **Zal Sissokho** is also a virtuoso of the kora. Originally from Senegal, he marvellously combines his openness to the world and his desire to preserve his culture and the oral traditions of the people of West Africa. He sings in Malinke and Wolof.

Aboulaye Koné

Originally from the Ivory Coast, **Aboulaye Koné** comes from a family of griots. He learned music in Burkina Faso from **Djeli Baba Kienou**. In Canada, he is considered a first-class Mandingo musician. His ensemble **Bolo Kan** won the 2008 and 2009 *Silver Syli* and *Gold Syli* for world music. His debut album *Afo Gné* was nominated for a 2012 Juno Award in the *Best World Music Album* category.

Fa Sissokho

After arriving in Quebec in 2013, **Fa Sissokho** quickly stood out on the Montreal African music scene for his immense talent. Fa is an impressive soloist: he masters the art of the djembe and manages to make it speak through a rhythmic language of rare intensity and beauty. His playing is imbued with electrifying energy and the sound of his djembe literally takes listeners' breath away.

Two remarks, however, concerning this concert: On the one hand, the more than minimalist program accompanying this show. Little, if any, relevant information about these four musicians, even though they are based right here in Montreal. No song reviews, let alone translations of the lyrics. It was as if this program had been compiled in a hurry, an incomprehensible shortcoming from a cultural Mecca like Salle Bourgie.

As well, the sound system of this concert will have made the musicophile in me raise his eyebrows. Both the mandingo guitar and the kora suffered from distortion when low notes were played. I don't understand how a venue of such distinction as Salle Bourgie could have allowed this sort of negligence to occur. It is also worth noting that Ms. Tapa's microphone was not set loud enough, allowing herself to be covered by these two instruments. Compared to the usual standard, this sound system also seemed to have been hastily adjusted.

Images: Frederic Faddoul

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Luc Archambault, writer and journalist, globe-trotter at heart, passionate about movies, music, literature and contemporary dance, came back to Montreal from an extended stay in China to pursue his unrelenting quest for artistic meaning.

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